

# A Long Fall

## Ends Mountain-Biking Career

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Memorial Day 2004 was one I'll never forget. It was the last weekend on the beach before a three-week-at-sea period in June, and I was up early to load my mountain bike on the car, with plans to enjoy the last few days outdoors. I had checked out a few trails online the night before, looking for something new. I was getting used to the single tracks just east of our base at Point Mugu, Calif.

My original plan of hiking around Lake Arrowhead had fallen through because both of my usual riding partners opted to spend their last weekend at home with their families. Despite this setback, I was determined to have a nice weekend. After an hour's drive on U.S. 101 and a few detours to find the trailhead, I gave my bike a quick once-over to ensure it was ready for a great day of riding.

Most of the riding I had done in the last few months had been on a road bike to get ready for a race in July, so I took a few minutes to get warmed up and reacquainted with how different a mountain bike handles. Adding to the relative unfamiliarity was a front shock I just had installed. This ride would be only my third one with the new suspension.

The website I had checked rated the trail as "challenging," and I wasn't disappointed. Before starting, I quickly surveyed the mountain—I barely could see the single track that snaked its way up the side toward the top. For most of the ride, I would have the wall of the mountain on my right and an almost sheer cliff on my left. The ride up was going to be a bear, but the ride down would be the reward.



Recognizing the trouble I would be in if I got too close to the side, I stayed well inside the right of the trail. I was only 30 minutes into the ride when a few more rocks (about the size of basketballs) than expected started showing up on the trail, making the ride even more taxing. But it wasn't anything I couldn't handle.

The real test was about to begin. After a quick plateau in slope, I geared up for another climb. The next one looked like it was going to ascend, turn, and get even rockier—all at once. My front tire hit a rock, and I slowed nearly to a stop. I had practiced this maneuver before. If I wasn't able to maintain my balance while stopped and then transition to a forward pedal, I quickly but smoothly would kick out my heel to get out of the clipless pedals. These pedals are God's gift to bike riders—they make climbing easier and provide more power for accelerating. However,

of my vision became very bright. I steadied myself against the rock and decided it probably wouldn't be a good idea to take off my helmet yet. Several hundred feet of drop off was below me. If I lost my balance, my fall might continue.

With my vision returning to normal, I tried to look at the back of my left arm to see how badly it was bleeding. I then realized my shoulder was dislocated. It was sheer rock above and unsteady rocks and boulders below—not a good setting for someone with a bad arm. I couldn't climb up, and, with only riding shoes on my feet, I didn't figure it was a good idea to try walking down. In short, I needed to make a phone call.

Before I had pedaled away from my car, the last item I put in my backpack was a cellphone. I had considered not taking it because there was a good chance I wouldn't have a signal once I got into any

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they're also a bit of an oxymoron, in that they actually clip your riding shoes to your bike.

I started to lose my balance to the left but, for some reason, kicked out with my right foot first—no doubt because I've favored that side since dislocating my left elbow in a previous riding accident. I was seconds away from suffering through my second riding accident.

Like a bad dream I couldn't wake up from, I started tumbling end-over-end down the side of the mountain. I scrambled like crazy with my arms to find anything to grip and slow my fall. I tumbled for a few seconds, and then, for an instant, all the noise stopped, and I knew I was free-falling. My last thought before hitting the ground was, "I wonder if I'm going to die."

Upon learning the answer to that question was no, I started wondering about something else: Where was my bike going to fall? I didn't need that heavy piece of debris hitting me after the beating I just had taken. Thankfully, it had stopped about 10 feet higher up the slope.

I didn't even know where to start checking myself for injuries—life-threatening or otherwise. Besides a deafening ringing in my ears, my left shoulder was numb, my left forearm felt wet, and my mouth was filled with dust—not bad, considering what I had expected. After I managed to stand up, the edges

terrain. After taking another look up the mountain, though, I quickly was reminded my signal might actually improve when I started climbing. If the cellphone didn't save my life, I have no doubt it spared me from more suffering than what I was about to endure.

It was no small effort to slip off my pack with a dislocated shoulder, but getting out my phone was the first step to getting rescued. About an hour after giving a rough description of my location to dispatch, I started feeling a little cold. It was a warm, sunny day, so the ocean breeze was cooling me off, or I was going into shock. Having suffered an elbow dislocation almost two years earlier, I remembered that, once the joint becomes immobile, it gets very stiff, making it nearly unbearable to move. I stayed on my feet and tried to move my arm around in small motions designed to prevent any stiffness.

About 90 minutes after my fall, I could hear a helicopter. Unfortunately, the plan was just for the helo to find me. I knew it was going to be a long afternoon, but I reminded myself it would be only a few hours until I hopefully would be in a hospital.

I've always heard that, "under stress, your training will take over," and that's what happened to me. Once I could see the helo, I called dispatch and asked them to have the pilot "slow down, look low, 9 o'clock left." I also started spinning my red biking jersey in the air with my good arm to get their attention.

I would have to wait another hour or so, though, for the EMTs from the Montecito Fire Department to rappel down and get me. After being strapped to the board and receiving a shot of morphine, I was hauled up the side of the mountain. Given its slope, I'm still amazed at how the EMTs were able to rescue me and climb at the same time.

A short ambulance ride, several X-rays, and an MRI later, I had the full diagnoses: dislocated shoulder, broken right wrist, and a broken neck. I no doubt was going to miss the next at-sea period, and I worried about my ability to lead a normal life, let alone continue my stint in naval aviation. To my amazement, I walked out of the hospital three days later, and six months later, I was cleared to fly. I left my mountain-biking career at the bottom of the mountain.

I never expected to have an accident (who does?), but there are a few actions I should have used ORM on before starting my adventure. First, my decision to go mountain biking alone in unfamiliar territory wasn't my finest. Second, it wasn't a good idea to try such a tough trail after being off a mountain bike for so long, especially one with a brand new suspension that caused the bike to handle differently. Getting back up to speed on my usual trail or an easier one would have been the way to go. The last thing I could have done would have been to practice dismounting from the pedals for a quicker jump off the bike when I started losing my balance.

My helmet undoubtedly saved my life. After a few weeks, I checked the helmet to see how my head would have fared without this protective device. The top was caved in, and a huge chunk was missing from the area that covered my left temple. The most ominous thing about this story is that, after falling and getting to my feet, I saw another helmet on the rocks from an earlier accident. I eventually learned I was the fourth rider to have gone over at that exact spot; two were going downhill, and another was going up. Take my advice, and avoid all trails off Sheffield Exit near Santa Barbara, Calif. 🚫



#### Resources:

- [http://mountainbike.about.com/od/bikingsafetytips/Mountain\\_Biking\\_Safety\\_Tips\\_for\\_Beginners.htm](http://mountainbike.about.com/od/bikingsafetytips/Mountain_Biking_Safety_Tips_for_Beginners.htm) [*Mountain Biking Safety Tips for Beginners*]
- [http://www.active.com/story.cfm?story\\_id=9262](http://www.active.com/story.cfm?story_id=9262) [*Mountain Biking Safety: First Aid for the Trail*]
- <http://safetycenter.navy.mil/media/seashore/issues/winter04/lookbefore.htm> [*Look Before You Ride*]
- <http://www.abc-of-mountainbiking.com/mountain-biking-safety/injury-prevention.asp> [*Mountain Biking Injury Prevention*]
- <http://www.abc-of-mountainbiking.com/mountain-biking-safety/common-injuries.asp> [*Mountain Biking Injuries*]